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Credentials, Competencies, and Certification

The process of licensing shapes the future of the profession by restricting entrance to those who meet certain qualifications. Licensing is a gatekeeping function, at least theoretically protecting the public from incompetent performance. Before we assess where we are and where we hope to be in relation to this topic, distinctions need to be made among terms.

Credentials is a general term indicating that the holder is duly entitled to claim a certain status. In librarianship, the M.L.S. degree is often held to be the requisite credential for entrance into the field. The term *competencies* is more specific, indicating a listing of abilities and skills, often task-oriented, that one should possess to be a good practitioner. *Certification* is an endorsement to practice in a specialized area, such as medical or school librarianship. While these terms apply to individuals, *accreditation* applies to educational programs which meet certain standards of quality and relevance in preparing future practitioners.

Accreditation of programs leading toward the M.L.S. degree is conferred by the American Library Association (ALA). Accreditation of the more narrowly-focused specialization of school librarianship is a function of the National Council on Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and, usually, a state department of education.

The current picture of licensing for the youth specialization is disparate and dismaying. Youth services librarians are separated into two distinct groups depending on the environment in which they work—i.e., school or public libraries. Factors related to their establishing competence to practice focus entirely on their environment rather than on skills and philosophies needed by all. There is virtually no licensing for public library youth specialists at the local level—only at systems or state levels and then only in certain states. When a credential is required, it is ordinarily the M.L.S. degree. The local public library, if it has a designated youth specialist at all, usually hires a person who likes children or young adults, is relatively outgoing and articulate, and will work for minimum wages or little more.

In the school setting, the certification required at entry level is generally the same as that for beginning teachers and it is determined state by state. The 1986-87 edition of *Requirements for Certification* (Burks, 1986) and the most recent compilation of this information in *School Library Journal* (Franklin, 1984) indicates that wide variation exists in courses of study, competency testing, level of certification, and nomenclature. To illustrate, fewer than half the states require a course in children's or young adult literature for certification. Twenty-three different titles are used for the school library media specialist. Fewer than ten states require a master's degree for initial certification.

The disheartening reality is that licensing practices for the youth specialization separate youth librarians from each other. Of equal importance, these practices cut them off from the rest of the field of librarianship, because youth librarians can be, and usually are, certified after completion of an undergraduate program. Other librarians generally begin to practice their craft after receiving an M.L.S. degree from a school accredited by the American Library Association. This important difference in educational preparation undoubtedly contributes to and exacerbates the feelings of isolation and inferiority repeatedly expressed by youth specialists (Ballett & Cornell, 1986).

Standards have traditionally been used to raise the level of service. They set a minimum level of support for materials, services, and personnel. Ideally, licensing is related directly or indirectly to these standards. Youth librarianship does have such standards, but for various reasons they have lost their power to effect improvements in service.

The most recent public library standards are a 1966 revision of standards published in 1956 that focused on development of county and regional library systems (ALA, 1967). Among the weaknesses charged to these standards are an emphasis on the institution rather than on services, on input rather than on output measures, lack of challenge for larger libraries but impossible expectations for small libraries, and requirements based on opinions of librarians rather than on solid research. These considerations plus other projects of the Public Library Association (PLA) during the early 1970s (Lynch, 1982) prepared the way for *A Planning Process for Public Libraries* (American Library Association, 1980), a document that represents a shift from a single national standard to locally-determined standards.

The manual provides guidelines to help libraries develop a set of standards that are appropriate for their community and which reflect their own philosophy. Since the delivery of this paper, new school library media standards have been published (ALA & AECT, 1988). The planning process has the advantage of involving local groups who will ultimately be responsible for funding but has the drawback of demanding time-

consuming, external participation. Realistically, there are situations in which a local group simply cannot be sufficiently trained or committed to carry through an involved planning process. In these cases, standards structured at the national level could help to identify service goals for local libraries. Meanwhile, during the last few years, several states have developed standards or guidelines for services to youth—e.g., New York, Virginia, Illinois, and New Jersey (New York Library Association, 1984; Cram, 1984, p. 91; Illinois Library Association, 1981; New Jersey State Library, 1986). Their impact on services has yet to be assessed, but they offer models that can be used as ammunition by those in other states hoping to improve their own services.

In the school setting, the question of standards is a hotly debated issue this year. James Liesener, chairman of the American Association of School Librarians (AASL)/Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT) Standards Writing Committee, reported to the AASL Minneapolis Conference audience in September that his committee has an outline and schedule for their work that will permit a 1987 publication date for new school library standards (Flagg, 1986).

Of the three most recent sets of school library standards (1960, 1969, and 1975), those of 1960 are generally considered to have had the greatest impact and those of 1975 the least. Several factors account for the difference. The country's economic and social climate in 1960 was right for this project. A generous grant (\$100,000) from the Council on Library Resources funded a dissemination and publicity campaign for the *1960 Standards*. The Knapp Foundation granted \$1,130,000 to fund a nationwide demonstration project. A great deal of federal money was available and specifically earmarked for school library media programs. Many schools greatly expanded their programs to reflect the *1960 Standards* or created them where none had previously existed. The *1960 Standards* seemed attainable, where the 1975 ones did not. In materials, for example, the *1960 Standards* called for ten books per student, the *1969 Standards* mandated twenty books or audiovisual units, and the *1975 Standards* again doubled the figure, recommending forty items per student. Although the term *items* is sufficiently vague to permit some latitude in interpretation, meeting this standard would nevertheless have been difficult because funding for education since 1975 has been less abundant, and retrenchment has become the norm. One finds schools today whose programs do not even measure up to the *1960 Standards* in terms of resources or staffing. A handout distributed at AASL's Minneapolis conference highlighting the 1985-86 Survey of Public School Libraries and Media Centers, reported that 93 percent of public schools had media centers and that 79 percent were served by a certified library media specialist part of the time (AASL, 1986).

Another factor in the successful implementation of the *1960 Standards*

and the somewhat less successful implementation of the 1969 *Standards* was that persons important to their implementation were involved in their development. Representatives from approximately twenty education agencies, such as the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development and the Department of Rural Education, were members of advisory committees. No doubt this involvement greatly aided in spreading the word and marshaling support for the two sets of standards. The 1975 *Standards*, on the other hand, had no such advisory committee. Dissemination efforts were mostly restricted to prepublication announcements and postpublication critiques in library literature. These evaluations found the standards to be jargon-laden, vague, and incomprehensible. They did not receive endorsements by state boards of education and have been generally ignored by everyone except us.

So standards in general have reflected political realities; they have frequently failed as change agents. Perhaps improvement in the way standards are created might make them more effective, or perhaps it would help if someone had a vested interest in implementing them. Or perhaps standards are not the best means to bring about improvement in service; and while standards are necessary, they are not sufficient, certainly in relation to licensing.

There are two major problems with current licensing practices: (1) the process is not producing the kind of people doing the kinds of jobs we want; and (2) the process is not providing the numbers we need to fill existing positions. As to the first concern, we could all share horror stories, tales that we would like to think are exaggerated but know are not—e.g., the team of two school media specialists in one high school who spend six weeks of the school year doing nothing but writing overdue notices, who readily admit that they do nothing that could not be done as well by a bright tenth grader, and who don't care; the public library children's person whose goal (unstated but real) is never to have any item in the collection that could be offensive to anyone. Few would argue that youth librarianship in general has attracted capable, highly motivated practitioners. Ken Haycock (1985) said: "There are still too many teacher-librarians who are paid professional salaries for being effective homemakers, book exchangers, and all round martyrs" (p. 108). James Liesener (1985) also acknowledged that "we are having difficulty attracting the level of talent that we once did" (p. 17). Jane Hannigan (1984), writing in *Libraries and the Learning Society*, observed that: "As a field we seem to accept and tolerate a large measure of rank incompetence in practice" (p. 31).

Many factors contribute to the difficulty of attracting capable people to youth librarianship. Financial incentives are comparatively low, as are status and image. The workplace is often pervaded by infantilism, with

little trust, respect, or autonomy bestowed on the youth specialist. Capable women and ethnic minorities now have options to enter fields formerly dominated by males and whites and are less likely to settle into education and librarianship. However, a greater hindrance is the fact that, especially for youth specialists in the school setting, there is no consensus within either the library or the school community what their roles should be. The professional literature, written mostly by library educators, overflows with convictions about proper roles. Haycock (1985) says: "The very nature of the role...is that of initiator and change agent" (p. 105). Liesener emphasizes the mediation function and views the youth specialist as an information intermediary. Unfortunately these terms do not communicate a clear message to prospective students or employers. Philip Turner (1985) has simplified the terminology and called his book on the role of the school library media specialist, *Helping Teachers Teach* (see also "Future of School Library Media Preparation," 1987).

When school principals do not know the potential of the school media program, and recent research documents the fact that they do not (Ballet & Cornell, 1986), failure is inevitable. The library may become the caretaker for students during the teachers' preparation periods, the repository for driver's education students who cannot all be out driving at one time, or the rainy day place for anyone who cannot be outside. Teachers, of course, conclude that the librarian as chief clerk has a soft job, and the youth specialist's image and status are encoded in stereotypic and stale jokes. Burnout and mediocrity follow rather naturally.

Evaluation practices contribute to another kind of failure. When basic competencies lists are compiled, items included too often fail to distinguish the librarian's role from the classroom teacher's role, and librarians fall into the trap of teaching hour after hour of library skills—in a vacuum, out of context, and useless for students' learning. Preparation programs also receive and deserve a great deal of the criticism for turning out youth specialists who either do not know or do not care what they are about.

The idea of listing basic competencies for the youth specialist and setting goals and measuring performance based on the list is not a bad idea. In fact, if a competency list goes beyond task orientation and includes attitudes and qualities of personality like empathy and caring, its use can be very helpful in establishing roles and scope of work for the youth specialist. The Young Adult Services Division (1982) list, "Competencies for Librarians Serving Youth," has this potential. It was developed originally to circulate among library school faculty, to encourage their developing or identifying courses that would help newly-graduated youth professionals to have the needed competencies. Happily, this listing has been found useful by practitioners. The New York Library Association's *Standards for Youth Services in Public Libraries of New York State* (1984)

adapted it to include the entire spectrum of youth services and not just young adult services.

The second problem, that of numbers, is also difficult. Some preparation programs put a great deal of energy into thinking through the kind of people they are training and the curriculum they offer, only to have the system subverted when demand exceeds supply. In a crunch—and we always seem to be in a crunch—exceptions to the credentialing system are made. Poorly-trained and unmotivated people are placed in positions they will cling to for the rest of their lives.

Rectifying the situation requires a realistic appraisal of the financial resources that are likely to be available. The theory of wages that our society has adopted is one that pays handsomely for the professions of medicine, law, and business on the grounds that medicine protects our life, law protects our property, and business creates jobs for other people. Other societies may have similar priorities but allocate resources differently to reach these goals. For example, an allergy-sufferer in this country consulted a physician who tested her for fifty-two allergies and designed a shot uniquely for her. When she moved to England, her physician, without any pretesting, administered a standard shot covering the three most common allergies. It worked and no further testing was presumed necessary. When the Chinese in the 1960s asked the question, How shall we improve the health of our people? the answer was the training of a core of medical technicians called barefoot doctors who could treat and restore health to a high percentage of those who were ill.

Our society is apparently unwilling to increase substantially the funding for education and librarianship. Hence we need to ask the following questions. How can resources be allocated differently to provide a more productive environment for both children and young adults and the youth librarians who serve them? How can the licensing process be altered to effect this needed reallocation?

In my opinion the report of The Holmes Group (1986), *Tomorrow's Teachers*, a plan for the reform of teacher education, provides a model which youth librarianship could profitably consider. The Holmes Group realized that reforming teacher education involves not only colleges of education but many others—i.e., the undergraduate programs of colleges and universities, the schools in which teachers work, state departments of education which license teachers, and society's willingness to pay for improved teaching. The Holmes Group recommendation related to licensing is that a differentiated staffing pattern be established which licenses at the instructor, professional teacher, and career professional teacher levels. The latter two credentials require preparation at the graduate level plus demonstration of effective practice. They are considered professional certifications and are renewable and tenure-earning. The former requires prep-

aration at the undergraduate level and passing examinations which test subject-matter competence. It is not considered a professional certification, is not renewable or tenure-earning, and does not permit the bearer to practice autonomously but only to work under the supervision of a career professional teacher. The reward structure would also be differentiated monetarily and also in number of opportunities to engage in a variety of workday activities commensurate with skill, preparation, and interest.

Adapting this model to youth librarianship would involve changes in many details. A differentiated licensing pattern would, however, recognize and appropriately reward different levels of commitment, preparation, and activity. In the school setting the instructor librarian would have an undergraduate major and tested subject-matter competence in one of the disciplines of the sciences, social sciences, or humanities. Working under the supervision of a career professional librarian, the instructor librarian would carry on a number of activities—e.g., some clerical (keeping circulation records), some managerial (supervising student assistants), some related to reading motivation (reading aloud, storytelling, booktalking), some to teaching (how to use indexes).

The professional librarian would, in addition to satisfying the instructor-level requirements, also have a master's degree in librarianship and would have passed an intellectually defensible competency examination in that area. The professional librarian would function independently and would both conduct learning activities with students and consult with teachers, other support staff, and administrators to plan and design instructional units. The career professional librarian would have demonstrated effective performance at the professional librarian level. Through a combination of further education and identification of interest and ability in a specialized area—such as supervising instructors or practicum students, carrying on research, participating with a university in training librarians—the career professional librarian would demonstrate ability to work in positions of authority in both the library and the school. Activities of the career professional librarian would emphasize the advocacy role and include contacts with students, teachers, administrators, universities, state departments of education, and other community and professional policy-making groups.

One of the advantages of a differentiated licensing process is its ability to respond to the disequilibrium between supply and demand. At present, shortages in qualified personnel result in lowering standards and admitting the poorly-trained to permanent positions. The differentiated pattern would allow filling vacancies at the instructor level. If the person hired wished to become a professional, there would be a period of years during which the appropriate training could take place. If the person did not make a commitment to the profession, the certificate would expire after

five years and employment would be terminated. Taxpayers might be spared some expensive mistakes. The process also has the potential to encourage commitment to and investment in the profession by talented persons who desire some occupational mobility and choice. Their expanded career opportunities and rewards would cut down on the tendency to settle into boredom or unexamined routines and would provide incentives for continued growth and development of diverse interests.

In the public library setting the differentiated licensing pattern would need to take into account the size, demography, and funding of the local public library plus other factors related to public library development. It is nevertheless desirable for the Public Library Association in cooperation with the Association for Library Service to Children and the Young Adult Services Division—all divisions of the American Library Association—to formulate a differentiated credentialing process that recognizes current reality and at the same time challenges communities to improve youth services. The professional certification for children's or young adult librarians should continue to be the M.L.S. degree, as Perritt and Heim (1987) have reiterated persuasively. For those individuals for whom this certification is impossible to acquire, or for those communities who cannot afford to pay for the professional certification, there needs to be an equivalent to the barefoot doctor training and certification. (I hesitate to call this the barefoot youth specialist certification, though the nomenclature may fit the salary scale!) Some service is preferable to no service for young people who live in rural, small, or poor communities (Vavrek, 1982).

Conclusion

Two major problems affect current licensing practices for youth librarians:

1. The process has not produced the kind of people doing the kind of jobs that are needed.
2. The process has not provided the numbers needed to fill existing positions.

Solutions to these problems cannot address the licensing process alone; they must involve a systems approach, analyzing the total environment in which youth specialists work. Licensing is influenced by preparation programs, accrediting agencies, state boards of education, state law, national standards, success or failure of those already licensed, the workplace, research, and costs at all levels.

The actions that could result in more effective credentialing practices are as multifaceted as the problems. These are:

1. Develop national and state standards or guidelines for youth services in both school and public libraries. These documents must articulate

clearly what the program of services intends to accomplish and what roles the youth librarian needs to assume. These documents must eschew obfuscation. They must be straightforward and free of jargon so that we can coalesce around them and use them to spread the word to the uninformed or uncommitted.

2. Examine ways to improve the quality of the product—i.e., the youth librarian. This examination should include scrutiny of what goes into the training process (input measures) and what is produced (output measures). Accreditation practices should screen programs and function as a gatekeeper at the input level. Competency testing at the output stage should assure the individual's achievement of a minimum level of knowledge and expertise.

Is there a way to toughen the accreditation requirements for programs that train youth librarians without raising the cost of accreditation to an exorbitant level? Single-purpose programs that train school library media specialists range from the poorest to the best available preparation. Should ALA or AASL be responsible for accreditation of these programs rather than NCATE, or should ALA/AASL investigate ways to participate in the NCATE accreditation reviews?¹ How can ALA's own Committee on Accreditation (COA) be persuaded to scrutinize more closely the quality of training youth specialists receive in general-purpose ALA-accredited M.L.S. programs? Is an attempt to get more youth librarians appointed to COA site visitation teams worth the effort involved?

Competency testing has often been a joke, failing to discriminate between the fit and the unfit. A highly charged political issue, it has unfortunately pitted professional educators against state government officials over who shall determine the proper credentials for those entering the profession (*The Alabama Librarian*, 1982, p. 4). With appropriate research applied to test construction and validation, however, the adequacy and fairness of such tests could be established, and they could contribute to protecting the public from an inferior product.

3. Work toward a differentiated staffing and licensing pattern that obviates the current practice of hiring poorly trained personnel for permanent positions when demand exceeds supply. The Holmes Group report, *Tomorrow's Teachers*, may serve as a model because: (a) it is relatively free of professional jargon and communicates to an educated reader from any discipline; and (b) there are many parallels between teaching and youth librarianship, including generally low professional status and image, licensing at the undergraduate level, and the importance of youth advocacy.
4. Speak with a strong, unified voice from national professional

associations, especially among the three youth divisions of the American Library Association.

Issues related to licensing persons to practice a profession that affects the public good are inevitably complex and confounding. Licensing for youth librarianship fits the pattern. The future is likely to present a labyrinth, not a paved highway for our convenience. Like Theseus in the labyrinth of the Cretan King Minos, we need courage, imagination, shrewd planning, and belief in ourselves if we are to be victorious. The three youth divisions of the American Library Association are poised to adventure, accepting the ambiguities of the task, and hanging on, as Theseus did to Ariadne's thread, for dear life.

NOTES

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FOOTNOTES

1. The Fall 1984 issue of the *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* reports the proceedings of a 1984 ALISE conference, which was devoted to the topic of accreditation. Whether ALA should accredit programs other than those leading to the M.L.S. degree was one of the many questions considered. The tremendous costs involved in accreditation no doubt deter ALA from broadening its current accreditation program.

2. Alabama is one of the states which has had a bitter confrontation over this question. See *The Alabama Librarian*, November 1982, p. 4, and September 1983, p. 1 for details.